



The Fourth Sunday of the Fast: Saint John of the Ladder

The Memory of this Saint is celebrated on March 30, where his biography may be found. He is celebrated today because his book, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, is a sure guide to the ascetic life, written by a great man of prayer experienced in all forms of the monastic polity: it teaches the seeker after salvation how to lay a sound foundation for his struggles, how to detect and war against each of the passions, how to avoid the snares laid by the demons, and how to rise from the snares laid by the demons, and how to rise from the rudimental virtues to the heights of God's love and humility. It is held in such high esteem that it is universally read in its entirety in monasteries during the Great Fast.

The Resurrection Dismissal Hymn and Kontakion of the Tone of the Week

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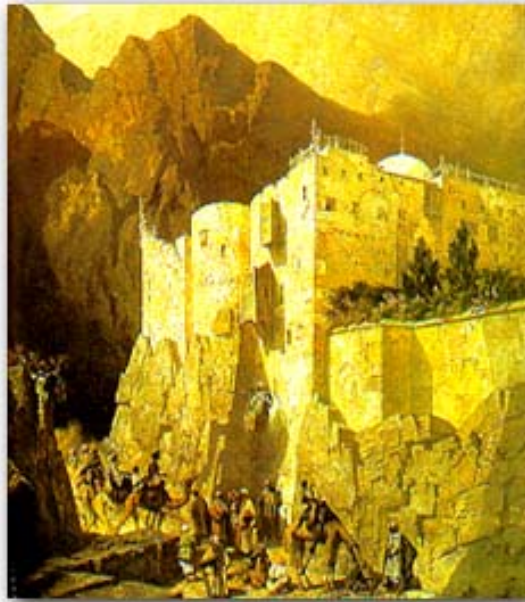
The Ladder of Divine Ascent Saint John Climacus Holy Transfiguration Monastery Brookline 02445

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SAINT CATHERINE'S MONASTERY MOUNT SINAI

WHERE THE PROPHET MOSES WAS SEEN DIRECTING THE SERVANTS
ON THE OCCASION OF SAINT JOHN CLIMACUS' APPOINTMENT
AS ABBOT OF SAINT CATHERINE'S MONASTERY.

Step 28

*On holy and blessed prayer, the mother of virtues,
And on the attitude of mind and body in prayer*

1. Prayer, by reason of its nature, is the converse and union of man with God, and by reason of its action upholds the world and brings about reconciliation with God; it is the mother and also the daughter of tears, the propitiation for sins, a bridge over temptations, a wall against afflictions, a crushing of conflicts, a work of angels, the food of all the bodiless spirits, future gladness, unending activity, a source of virtues, a means of obtaining graces, invisible progress, food of the soul, enlightenment of the mind, an axe against despair, a demonstration of hope, a cure for sorrow, the wealth of monks, the treasure of hesychasts, the reduction of anger, the mirror of progress, the disclosure of stature, an indication of one's condition, a revelation of future things, and a sign of glory. For him who truly prays, prayer is the court, the judgment hall and the tribunal of the Lord before the judgment to come.¹

2. Let us rise and listen to what that holy queen of the virtues cries with a loud

¹ Please see *The Ladder* Step 19:5. It is possible for all to pray with a congregation; for many it is more suitable to pray with a single kindred spirit; solitary prayer is for the very few.

voice and says to us: Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and ye shall find rest for your souls and healing for your wounds. For my yoke is easy ² and is a sovereign remedy for great sins.

4. When you are going to stand before the Lord, let the garment of your soul be woven throughout with the thread of obliviousness to wrongs. Otherwise, prayer will bring you no benefit.

5. Let your prayer be completely simple. For both the publican and the prodigal son were reconciled to God by a single phrase.

7. Before all else, let us list sincere thanksgiving first on the scroll of our prayer. On the second line, we should put confession and heartfelt contrition of soul. Then let us present our petition to the King of all. This is the best way of prayer, as it was shown to one of the brethren by an angel of the Lord.

8. If you have ever been under trial before an earthly judge, you will not need any other pattern for your attitude in prayer. But if you have never stood before a judge yourself and have not seen others being cross-questioned, then learn at least from the way the sick implore the surgeons when they are about to be operated on or cauterized.

11. If you feel sweetness or compunction at some word of your prayer, dwell on it; for then our guardian angel is praying with us.

12. Do not be bold, even though you may have attained purity; but rather approach with great humility, and you will receive still more boldness.

13. Though you may have climbed the whole ladder of the virtues, pray for forgiveness of sins. Listen to the cry of Paul regarding sinners: Of whom I am chief.³

14. Oil and salt are seasonings for food; and tears and chastity give wings to prayer.

19. The beginning of prayer consists in banishing by a single thought⁴ the thoughts that assault us at the very moment that they appear; the middle stage consists in confining our minds to what is being said and thought; and its perfection is rapture in the Lord.

24. For everyone, and especially for those who have come to the King in order to receive remission of their debt, unutterable contrition is necessary. As long as we are still in prison, let us listen to Him who speaks to Peter:⁵ Put on the garment of obedience, cast off your own wishes and, stripped of them, approach the Lord in your prayer, invoking His will alone. Then you will receive God, Who guides the helm of your soul and pilots you safely.

25. Rise from love of the world and love of pleasure, lay aside cares, strip your mind, renounce your body; because prayer is nothing other than estrangement from the world, visible and invisible. For what have I in heaven? Nothing. And what have I desired on earth beside Thee? Nothing, but to cling continually to Thee in prayer without distraction. To some, wealth is pleasant; to others, glory; to others,

²Cf. St. Matthew xi, 38-30.

³ I Timothy 1, 15.

⁴ μονολογίστως. This may mean by single words of prayer.

⁵ Vid. Acts xii, 8.

possessions; but my wish is to cling to God, and to put the hope ⁶ of my dispassion in Him.

26. Faith ⁷ gives wings to prayer, and without it we cannot fly up to Heaven.

28. Though the judge did not fear God, yet because a soul, widowed from Him through sin and a fall, troubles Him, He will avenge her of her adversary, the body, and of the spirits who make war upon her.⁸ Our good Redeemer attracts to His love those who are grateful by the quick satisfaction of their petitions. But He makes ungrateful souls remain in prayer before Him for a long time, in hunger and thirst for their petition; for an ill-conditioned cur, when once it gets its bread, makes off with it and leaves the giver.

29. Do not say, after spending a long time at prayer, that nothing has been gained; for you have already gained something. And what higher good is there than to cling to the Lord and persevere in unceasing union with Him?

30. A convict does not fear his sentence of punishment so much as a fervent man of prayer fears this duty of prayer. So if he is wise and shrewd, by remembering this he can avoid every reproach, anger, worry, and interruption, affliction, satiety, temptation, and distracting thought.

35. He who is busy with something, and continues it when the hour of prayer comes, is deceived by the demons. Those thieves aim at stealing from us one hour after another.

36. Do not decline when asked to pray for the soul of another, even though you have not obtained the gift of prayer; because through contrition the faith of the suppliant also frequently saves the one who prays for him.

37. Do not be puffed up if you have prayed for another and been heard, for it is his faith that has been strong and effective.

39. We should always perform every virtue, especially prayer, with great feeling. A soul prays with feeling when it gets the better of bad temper and anger.

40. What is obtained by frequent and prolonged prayer is lasting.

41. He who possesses the Lord will no longer express his object in prayer, for then, within him, the Spirit maketh intercession for him with groanings that cannot be uttered.

42. Do not admit any sensory phantasies during prayer, lest you become subject to derangement.

⁶ Cf. Psalm lxxii, 26-28 LXX

⁷ The Choir of the Holy Fathers cries aloud: Faith is "the faith once delivered to the Saints" for which we "should earnestly contend" (Jude3). St. Paul, in writing to the Ephesians insists on one faith: "There is...one Lord, one faith, one baptism" (Eph. 4:5). To the church in Galatia, he says, there "is not another...gospel." Continuing, he warns, "Though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be anathema" Gal.1:6-8. The Lord Himself asks, "when the Son of man cometh, shall He find the faith on the earth?" (Lk. 18:8). This faith is the faith of the Orthodox Church. Let us make no mistake; there "is not another... gospel." So let us, according to our strength, "earnestly contend for the faith once delivered to the Saints." May the prayer of our holy Fathers be with us in this saving struggle. [Ed.]

⁸ Vid. St. Luke xviii, 1-7.

43. The assurance of every petition becomes evident during prayer. Assurance is loss of doubt. Assurance is sure proof of the unprovable.

46. Some say that prayer is better than the remembrance of death, but I praise two natures in one person.⁹

49. Do not abandon prayer until you see that, by Divine providence, the fire and water¹⁰ have diminished. For perhaps you will not have such a moment for the remission of your sins again in all your life.

51. It is one thing frequently to keep watch over the heart, and another to supervise the heart by means of the mind, that ruler and high-priest that offers spiritual sacrifices to Christ. When the holy and super-celestial fire comes to dwell in the souls of the former, as says one of those who have received the title of Theologian,¹¹ it burns them because they still lack purification, whereas it enlightens the latter according to the degree of their perfection. For one and the same fire is called both the fire which consumes and the light which illuminates.¹² That is why some people come from prayer as if they were marching out of a fiery furnace, and feel relief as from some defilement and from all that is material, while others are as if illuminated with light and clothed in a garment of joy and humility. But those that come from prayer without having experienced either of these two effects have prayed bodily (not to say after the Jewish fashion), and not spiritually.

52. If a body is changed in its activity from contact with another body, then how can he remain unchanged who touches the body of God with innocent hands?¹³

53. We see that our all-good King, like an earthly king, sometimes distributes His gifts to His warriors Himself, sometimes through a friend, sometimes through a slave, and sometimes in an unknown way; and it will be according to the garment of humility that each of us wears.

54. Just as an earthly king is disgusted by a man who turns his face away and talks to his master's enemies while in his presence, so will the Lord be disgusted by a man who admits unclean thoughts during his set time of prayer.

55. With this stick [Ed. *the Jesus Prayer*] drive away the dog that approaches, and however often he behaves impudently, never give in to him.

56. Ask with tears, seek with obedience, knock with patience. For thus he who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him that knocketh it shall be opened.¹⁴

59. Do not let the time of prayer be an hour for considering necessary things or even spiritual tasks, otherwise you will lose the good part.¹⁵

60. He who keeps constant hold of the staff of prayer will not stumble. And even

⁹ A loving nature (prayer) and a fearful nature (remembrance of death), just as Christ has His Divine and human natures united in one Person.

¹⁰ I.e. fervour and tears.

¹¹ St. Gregory the Theologian, *Or.* 40.

¹² Hebrews xii, 29; St. John 1, 9.

¹³ This refers to the power of the Body of Christ in Holy Communion.

¹⁴ St. Matthew vii, 8.

¹⁵ Vid. St. Luke x, 42.

if he does, his fall will not be fatal. For prayer is a devout coercion of God.¹⁶

63. If you constantly converse with the King concerning your enemies, take courage when they attack you. You will not labour long, for they will soon retire of their own accord. These unholy spirits do not want to see you receive a crown for your struggle against them through prayer. And moreover, they will flee as from fire when scourged by prayer.¹⁷

64. Have all courage, and you will have God as your teacher in prayer. Just as it is impossible to learn to see by word of mouth, because seeing depends on one's own natural sight, so it is impossible to learn the beauty of prayer from the teaching of others. Prayer has a Teacher all its own—God—that teacheth man knowledge,¹⁸ and grants the prayer of him who prays, and blesses the years of the just.¹⁹



Step 28 does indeed contain the heart of St. John's teaching on prayer. *The Ladder*, however, is interwoven with words about prayer and examples of the Fathers at St. Catherine's Monastery who prayed and whose prayer was blessed.

Sept 28 is offered as an introduction to the feast of spiritual riches in *The Ladder* for the person who is not a monastic. Most folks do not live in a Monastery. Were a layman to pick up *The Ladder* and try to start at the first step and go all the way through, it would not be surprising if he soon laid the book down after reading about all the many renunciations and "hateless hatreds" he encounters in the first few pages. There well may be those for whom Step 28 could serve as a portal to St. John's charming, and arresting, way with words which flavors this time-honored text of Christian wisdom.

St. John's spiritual direction about prayer is just the thing for most of us. An unspoken need for many people is to have some direction in prayer. It is most helpful to know that prayer is "the mother of virtues." Prayer is where we begin, so that when we speak or act, the Lord gives us guidance because He knows that we are listening to Him. We can build a virtuous life when we build it upon prayer. There is no other way.

¹⁶ St. Luke xviii, 5.

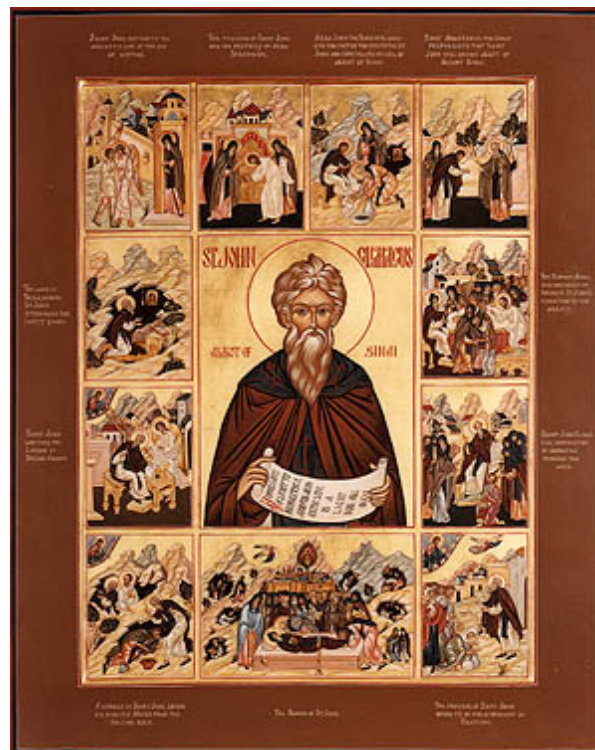
¹⁷ Cf. *The Ladder* Step 21:7 Flog your enemies with the name of Jesus, for there is no stronger weapon in heaven or earth. [There is no prayer more powerful than the Jesus prayer. Ed.]

¹⁸ Psalm xciii, 10 (LXX).

¹⁹ I Kings ii, 9 (LXX) "granting his petition to him that prays; and He blesses the years of the righteous, for by strength man cannot prevail."



AN ANCIENT ILLUSTRATION SHOWING MOUNT SINAI ON THE LEFT,
AND, APPARENTLY, ST. CATHERINE'S MOUNTAIN ON THE RIGHT,
WITH THE MONASTERY AT THE FOOT OF MOUNT SINAI.



Saint John Climacus
Whom the holy Church Celebrates on March 30
With scenes from his life.